

## FARMWORKERS IN HOEDSPRUIT, LIMPOPO

# An Education Perspective



This study provides an eye-opener for stakeholders and policy makers interested in challenges faced broadly by farmworkers and particularly by learners attending farm schools.

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Limpopo province is one of the provinces which has high agricultural activity both at subsistence and commercial level. The Hoedspruit area, situated at the foot of Drakensburg Mountains in the low-veld Mopani area has climatic conditions which are conducive to a variety of commercial farming operations focusing on products such as citrus, wine, dairy, subtropical fruits and annual crops such as sweet corn and vegetables. Accordingly, the area harbours a substantial number of farm workers from the surrounding communities which include Acornhoek, The Oaks and Maruleng village.

There is limited information about the lives of farmworkers in South Africa. In order to understand the situation in the context of farm lives, a research study conducted in Hoedspruit has illuminated a number of social and structural challenges faced by farmworkers and children in respect of education on the farms. This article places accent on the education system faced daily by children and farmworkers. These are their lived experiences: waking up in compounds, walking to schools, being taught in multi-grade classrooms, receiving quality or non-quality education...

The aim of this study is twofold: firstly

to conduct research on the livelihood of farmworkers; and secondly, to seek an understanding of teaching and learning in farm schools. Studies of farm school education have been undertaken broadly within the overall performance of public schools and yet there is little understanding of the hardships and impediments children go through on the farms. Researchers visited farms, schools, clinics and NGOs in 2007 in Hoedspruit and also asked questions on the implementation of new legislation such as the sectoral determinations that have been put in place since the dawn of democracy. A follow-up visit was made in 2016

to monitor the progress made with regard to policy implementation and important observations were made on the following:

- Unemployment, and employment of cheap labour from Mozambique;
- the scourge of HIV/AIDS;
- being a child of a farmworker who resides in a farm compound; and
- crime in Hoedspruit town and farms.

Information gathered on farms such as Hoedspruit is intended to inform the policy makers, members of the legislature, delegates in the NCOP and other industry stakeholders in the province and departments such as education, labour, social development and health on how to address challenges of farmworkers with respect to working and living conditions, and equally important farm school education.

### The Research Approach

Bronislaw Malinowski's (1884-1942) anthropological study on the Trobriand Islanders sought to understand daily living experiences of the islanders by enmeshing the participant in the community. The participant therefore felt a sense of empowerment by telling a story from an 'insider's perspective'. Despite Malinowski's ability to afford treatment in private hospitals, he took the decision to be hospitalised in a homestead and be healed following an orthodox method.

Researchers in this study visited both farms and farm schools based in the Bavaria Estate Farms Olifantsfontein estate, Moria route, Swadini, Pamalat and Driehoek in Hoedspruit in 2007 and 2017. However, data collectors were booked accommodation in the Hoedspruit town's lodges mainly used by international tourists. This is the existing gap in the study and it is now recognised that researchers should have stayed in the farm compounds over a period of time, in this way enmeshing themselves in the study.

This article concerns the results of data findings collected in 2017. Information was sought from farmworker representatives who attend regular workshops at clinics and the local Training Trust in line with a qualitative approach of using interviews

and observations. The approach used in this study is what Denzin (1978) defines as 'within-method' kind of triangulation which uses multiple techniques within a given method to collect and interpret data and involves cross-checking for internal consistency or reliability. Following this approach, the researchers were more confident of their results. Data was cross-checked and used for some confirmation and completeness, which brought balance to the study.

A total of 18 farmworkers, male, female, youth and adults were interviewed following a specially designed instrument. The tool generated various sub-themes such as salary, living conditions and farm school education, and these sub-themes formed the corpus from which this study

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was structured. Different employees in different industries, namely subtropical crops, citrus, vegetables, pack house and game industries were interviewed. Data validation was conducted by interviewing stakeholders in Hoedspruit such as the South African Police Services, a Primary School, a Clinic in Bavaria Estate and NGOs.

### Farmworkers

Farming for food production is a tough job for both the farm-owner and farmworker because practically, every farm-owner is expected to be the first one to be present in the morning and last one to leave, thus leading from the front by example.

Farmworkers having worked in the farms of Bavaria and Parmalat for many years indicated that these

farms had now become multinational corporations through acquisitions, and farmworkers had to adjust to the new ownership and new rules of loss and profit. Regardless of the experience and contribution which they had sacrificed for all their life to the farmer, they were absorbed into the new contracts as new farmworkers.

Farmworkers had for many years been accommodated at the compounds where the only time for happiness is at the month-end when friends and relatives from the nearby villages visit the farms. Rooms were found to be small, not suitable to accommodate families with children and this stands in contrast to the other children who are learners in the nearby farm school. South African music Weekend Special from Brenda Fassie and Month End Lover still fills the passages and atmosphere in Jongoman farm compounds, combined with Zimbabwean and Mozambique music being played at the same time in the sleeping hall and kitchen until the month end wages get finished. Each farmworker pays accommodation of about R100 including electricity and water, and this is deducted from their salary. Many of the farmworkers say they initially stayed in the farm compounds provided by the employer but now prefer to stay at home because their net salary is not sufficient to take care of two households. It therefore becomes more economical to travel to work while staying with the family, more so since they are also expected to pay R10 for care of their children in the early childhood development centres.

Respondents believed that they are not being treated well by supervisors based on the colour of their skin and sometimes treated as suspects especially when criminal activities take place. Authors such as Michael Apple and Clifford Geertz demonstrated how power relations, subtle messages and hegemony in cultural studies inform the relations that exist between the employer and employee, working and middle class, supervisor and ordinary worker, and the rich and poor. Glaring actions of intimidation by managers, unfair dismissal as well as the lack of recognition of special skills are witnessed from time to time. When

farmworkers get sick due to the nature of their work, they are forced to go to the local farm clinic of Hlokomela and the cost of R50 is incurred by the worker. If they do go to another clinic the health care letter is deemed invalid which leads to a deduction from their salaries since the employer will consider it as absenteeism.

### Housing

The responses of farmworkers varied according to farms. Farmworkers who stay on the farms indicated that there is provision of accommodation for individual farmworkers but some are still sharing. The common problem observed during the research is that the houses are old and of poor quality and sometimes dilapidated while the employers continue to deduct money for accommodation monthly. The houses are reportedly not properly sealed to protect them from cold weather and rain and there is no provision for kitchen and toilets. One respondent summarised that farmworkers “are staying like dogs and pigs”, although they pay between R90 to R200 per month for the accommodation with electricity and water for free.

### Participation of stakeholders and children's education

The South African Police Services conduct farm patrols by visiting farms and schools to ensure that there is public order. Police also go into the community areas and farm schools seeking to understand the problems which are experienced in the farms. In partnership with the farmers “Community-Farm watchers” has been established and these farm-watchers conduct regular searches through road blocks to deter criminal activities in the area. SAPS has largely built good relationships with the schools and community. However, SAPS noted that major cases reported in the area include the unfair labour practices as well as the non-payment of debts to each other when there is borrowing of money. The police then refer cases of the unfair labour practices to the Department of Labour so that they can intervene and assist the workers.

The composition of the workforce

includes workers from Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Swaziland; however despite this situation the police had not experienced xenophobic attacks. Police indicated they have enough resources to respond to the crimes in Hoedspruit and to enable them to deal adequately with farm attacks. There is a responsible person in the police station that is allocated to serve as farm watch secretary. Further, one police officer has also been allocated to the school to have workshops with learners to let them know about their roles in the community; how they can protect themselves and also how not to get involved in criminal activities like stealing on behalf of an older person.

The Department of Health and Social Development in partnership with the Hoedspruit Training Trust is assisting through the payment of the community health workers (Nompilos) in farms to ensure that health care work becomes a priority on the farm. Furthermore, there is a new initiative regarding Hlokomela's partnership with SASSA, which will focus on food provision to individuals who are needy in the farming area.

The Department of Labor continues to play its role in regulating and providing guidelines for the employment conditions of farmworkers. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the province is also playing its role to ensure that farmworkers remain employed and thereby contribute to the GDP.

### Work security, training, career growth and wages

During the interviews it was evident that since the introduction of the Sector Determination by the Department of Labour, the majority of the farmworkers indicated that they have been employed as permanent workers and they have a written contract with the employer. Many of them further show that they get trained for the work that they are expected to do as it may enhance their chance for career growth in their line of work.

The majority of farmworkers interviewed (general workers, drivers, and administrative staff) reported that they earn salaries between R2000

and R5000 according to the salary determined by the Department of Labour. Interviews indicate that the majority of farmworkers are working a maximum of between eight to nine working hours daily. It must be stated that the farm wages differ from farm to farm, the kind of work (maintaining fences, kitchen) and position or level: but there are few employees that earned below the sectoral determination by the Department of Labour. However, some workers' salaries did not correspond with the position indicated; for example, where a supervisor still earns below R2000. According to the 2016 sector determination, the farmworkers should be paid about R2778.83 per month or R641.32 per week or R128.26 when working 9 hours in a day.

Importantly, it can be recorded that the majority of the respondents (general workers, drivers) indicated that their salaries are increased once a year and have the following as benefits:

- paid vacation leave;
- paid sick leave;
- maternity leave for female workers; and
- provision for UIF deductions.

Due to the absence of a union, farmworkers are negotiating their own salary increases. This has affected the sectoral determination salary framework, and no accommodation and travelling allowances are paid. Consequently some farmworkers stay on the farms while others have to travel distances to and from work.

### Leave days and Working hours

Farmworkers work between 7 to 9 hours a day, with a majority working 9 hours, which is in line with the latest sectorial determination by the Department of Labour. Some workers expressed dissatisfaction with the issues of working hours indicating that the employers tend to reduce the number of hours which they work, thus resulting in farmworkers getting paid less money. Some indicate that when they work overtime, the employers do not pay them accordingly or timeously.

Most of the surveyed farmworkers indicated that they have paid vacation leave, maternity leave as well as paid sick leave. However, it

was strongly indicated that that even with the provision of sick leave some farmworkers complained passionately that they are still not allowed to go to the clinic to consult during working hours, especially to collect medications.

### **Health, social welfare and occupational health and safety**

A provision for UIF deductions in their salaries as per the law is available and most also have pension or retirement fund arrangements. However, almost all of them do not have provision for medical aid especially by the employer. This is one of the concerns raised by a farmworker who showed that when they get injured or sick, the employers do not want to pay for their medical expenses.

A number of farmworkers are affected by a variety of sickness such as TB, HIV/Aids, Diabetes and Epilepsy. It has been found that some farmworkers who already have chronic conditions such as diabetes and HIV/Aids are drinking too much alcohol which also affects their wellbeing. The wellness programme led by Hlokomela NGO, and now in partnership with the Department of Social Development is being implemented and farmworkers are attended to medically. They receive ARVs as well as information and most farmworkers appreciate the NGO and government response to these challenges as some farmworkers have died already. However, some of the workers who are affected by HIV-Aids are still not willing to adhere to ARV medications, even when information is disseminated or medicines available. The other challenge mentioned is that some farmworkers do not want to go to collect the medications due to strict time adherence by supervisors. There is some provision for sick leave but when workers leave for the clinic to collect treatment medications their day is recorded as a half day, which then impacts on their monthly wages. When the employers are approached by the Health Care Representatives, they agree that they will release employees but there are always contestations on deductions and working half-day. This requires the Department of Labor to tighten up its policies and supervision.

An area of concern raised by some

of the respondents is that they are not provided with proper protective uniform which is suitable for their work. There are incidents of some of the employers being reluctant to take responsibility for the payment of workers' medical expenses, and that, even when the employee is injured or unwell, the employers expect them to continue to operate fully in their position without taking into consideration their personal situation.

### **Discrimination, nepotism and abuse of the leadership role**

Overt or subtle racism in the farms is still prevalent as some of the respondents said. For example, when something is reported missing, black people are the first to be searched or suspected while white people are not

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searched. There is a main gate where the vehicles are signed in and out but when going out only black people are searched. In some farms, the trusted stuff is mainly white supervisors. As the narrative of rhino poaching began to make headline news in the area of Hoedspruit, respondents say; “black employees are always the first suspects in Rhino Poaching incidents” and this perception provides one of the discourses and debates amongst the farmworkers as they retire to their compounds after a long heavy day.

Respondents were concerned that white employees are paid more than black counterparts while many of African workers have better work experience and more skills. The recruitment process has been highlighted as a major concern, as

respondents say they hire those that are close to them and there is overt favouritism by managers.

The working hours are not stable as they differ from season to season, as do the working conditions. Sexual relationships between supervisors and workers are a complex thing to debate, and even more complex when it comes to making a judgement. These incidents can involve unfair labour practices such as favouritism, sexual harassment and corrupt promotions.

These narratives continue to demonstrate in some respect lack of adherence to the conditions of service as provided by the Department of Labour Act. This further impacts on the deeper societal imbalances that are explicit in the abuse of women and children, leading to concomitant poverty and neglect of children. Pregnancy rate by female workers by their supervisors coupled with racism, discrimination and favouritism are powerful vignettes emanating from the fieldwork notes.

### **Farm school Education**

When the schools reopened not all the children were present due to lack of transport because most were still at home. Some learners had not returned to the farms where the schools are located because their parents were still on holiday. Learners in the main benefit from scholar transport provided by the provincial department of education. However, it was reported that the number of children making use of scholar transport had decreased because at least more than 20 learners or families from other farming areas were evicted. Some of these children eventually dropped out of school while others migrated to nearby towns such as BaPhalaborwa and Tzaneen.

The Limpopo Provincial Department of Education's School Nutrition Programme has a budget of at least one billion rands with which to provide all learners with food at school. Unfortunately it uses the statistics of the attendance during the first 10 days of the school term to calculate the amount of food required. At this time the enrolment is low. As the year progressed more children returned to the farm schools which meant



that the available food needed to be shared amongst all the learners. The government continues to allocate food according to the initial statistics taken in the first 10 days. The issue was raised with the Department of Education and the matter needs to be addressed as it impacts on the application and usage of conditional grants.

Enrollment in the multi-grade schools is higher in Grade 1-3 and then the number of learners decreases towards grade 6 and 7. The decrease is caused by children living with parents in one room and when they grow up it is no longer functional or healthy to share one room with adults. Therefore children are forced to relocate to other schools where they will stay with grandparents or other carers and often go to school with inadequate parenting. Unfortunately many eventually drop out.

These are the harsh realities and daily experiences of children who grow up in the farms. Already their destiny in life has been decided. Many of them do not have the same opportunities as children in villages, townships or suburbs.

These children are in multi-grade classes of:

- Grade 1, 2 and 3: Sepedi class ;
- Grade 1, 2 and 3: Xitsonga class; and
- Grade 4, 5, 6 and 7 English classes (one educator).

There are 3 educators in the school (including the principal) for 48 children and therefore the staff establishment is no longer in their favour because the recommended ratio of 1:32 is not applicable. The school only qualifies for 2 educators based only on the ratio of teacher to learners unless parents can hire additional teachers and pay them salaries.

The content, epistemology, teaching, pedagogy in these classes is heavy for only the 3 existing educators. For instance, the workload for each of the 3 teachers is in the following format:

- Grade 1, 2 and 3 have four subjects,
- Grade 4, 5 and 6 have 6 subjects,
- Grade 7 has 9 subjects.

With the new developments at the school, two teachers are expected to share the 9 subjects in these classes and

the challenge is that when they attend to one set of learners, one class will remain without a teacher. Ultimately this will continue to affect the quality of education for these children due to staff limitation in this multi-class system. The Department of Basic Education (2001) shows that at least 1 130 659 learners get enrolled in Grade 1 in South Africa which indicates improved access, but only 520 000 reach matric. The low throughput is highlighted by the National Development Plan 2030 and premised on this data, this study indicates that rural and farm school education is a major contributor to the dropout rate. According to the principal the challenges listed below affect learners, especially whose parents are farmworkers, which ultimately affects their participation and performance in school.

**“An area of concern raised by some of the respondents is that they are not provided with proper protective uniform which is suitable for their work.”**

- Children come to school untidy which implies that the parents might not be having time to attend to them in the morning.
- Children come to school sick because parents say are not allowed to take the children to the clinic by their bosses (farmers). This compels teachers to leave school and take the children to the clinic thereby taking the educator's time to teach in a school which already experiences a shortage of educators.
- The children on the farms often have to share the room with parents, which impacts on their behaviour.
- Learners demonstrate violent behavior (especially fighting) towards each other and others playing while acting as adults – which suggest they could be copying something from home.

- According to the principal, some learners who drop out of school may go to other schools while others go to look for jobs in the farms prompting child labour. However, the school encourages the local businesses not to hire those who are still of school-going age as a way to reduce school dropouts.

### Concluding Recommendations

The visit and interviews conducted in Hoedspruit with the farmworkers and responsible officials demonstrated that there is a need for further and in-depth research to observe and understand the situation faced by farm workers not only in the area but farms in Limpopo and South Africa in general. However, this study provides an eye-opener for stakeholders and policy makers interested in challenges faced broadly by farmworkers and particularly by learners attending farm schools.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the data from farmworkers in various capacities, health representatives and the police service. However it will be useful to obtain information from the employers. Based on the few interactions, it is evident that there are some signs of improvement from the initial study undertaken in 2007 especially when focusing on the support by the police. The employee assistance programme, and educational facilities to support the children of the farmworkers demand that the stakeholder departments such as Health, Social Development and Education must intensify human resource capacity in the farms. It is evident that the conditions of farmworkers in the workplace still need to be improved, especially when considering alleged subtle mistreatment of employees by the supervisors and employers. However, concrete and substantive information on these findings needs to be gathered following anthropological methods of research not only through interviews but observations with researchers enmeshed in the compounds and farms. ■

### References

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